

Issues in Designing English for Islamic Studies Courses

**Prof. Reima Al-Jarf
King Saud University
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

**Second Online Reading Matrix Conference.
September 16-18, 2005.**

Issues in Designing English for Islamic Studies Courses

ABSTRACT

Undergraduate students majoring in Islamic Studies at the women's colleges in Saudi Arabia need to take an English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) course each year of the B.A. program. The material for all four courses was developed in-house by a group of instructors at those colleges. An examination of the course material in general and reading texts, in particular, revealed many weaknesses. It was found that each course material consists of 6 units, each of which consisting of a reading text, few vocabulary items and their dictionary definition and comprehension questions that students can answer by just matching the words of the question with those of the text. Vocabulary exercises required the students to fill in the blanks with the words that were defined or to look up the meanings in the dictionary. The reading passages lacked gradation in length and difficulty level and lacked variety in theme. They contained no context clues to develop the students' ability to infer meaning of unknown words from context. English passages were simply a literal translation of Arabic sentences rather than connected discourse. The texts lacked cohesion, coherence, and an organizational structure (enumeration, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, definition, sequencing, classification...etc.). No devices signaling the text structure and no transitional words between sentences and paragraphs were used. Ideas are abstract, vague and have insufficient details. Stories had no theme, no setting, and no sequence of events. The passages lacked the stylistic features of English texts. Although the students are required to translate the same reading passages, translation skills and techniques were not mentioned. English for Islamic Studies courses need to be re-designed by a team of subject-matter, curriculum design and native English language experts. Discourse structure, stylistic features, register and specific reading and vocabulary skills should be taken into consideration in the course design. A model for designing English for Islamic Studies courses is provided.

Keywords: *Curriculum design, Islamic Studies curriculum design, English for Specific Purposes, ESP, English for Islamic Studies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Many graduate and undergraduate students, in many countries around the world, take English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses depending on their major area of study. Stevens (1977) defined ESP courses as those in which the learner's study requirements determine the objectives and content of those courses in part or in full, as in teaching English to doctors, meteorologists, secretaries, businessmen and diplomats, air traffic controllers, nurses, chemical engineers, students of physics and English literature, and others. Schleppegrell & Bowman (1986) added that the concept of teaching ESP revolves around the idea of not teaching English as a separate course that has nothing to do with the students' role in real life, but rather on the integration of language and students' area of specialization. Such an integration constitutes a strong motivation for the students because they can apply what they learn in class to their major area of study. Robinson (1985) indicated that the ESP course has a specific goal, which is the student's success in performing his role while studying or working. ESP courses are based on an analysis of students' needs and are designed according to those needs. One ESP course may differ from another in the skills, topics, attitudes, functions, and structures chosen. An ESP course usually has a fixed time period. Students may differ in their mastery level of the language. Students may study the course before joining a study program or job, while on the

job or while studying. They may be proficient in their job or area of specialization, but they need to perform their role in English as they do it in their native language.

When designing an ESP course, Mackay (1978), Munby (1978), Robinson (1980), and Richterich & Chancerel (1980), and Schmidt (1981) indicated that the needs of students are of paramount importance in designing the course, because they determine the language skills that the students need to acquire and develop most, the teaching methodology, the course material, and the activities to be used in the course. Richterich and Chancerel (1980) added that students' needs can be analyzed by the students themselves or stakeholder, the college to which they belong, or all three together.

Edelfelt (1980) defined needs as what a person wants and does not have. It is the individual's perception of what exists in reality, and what should be. Stufflebeam et al. (1985) stated that the process of a needs assessment is the process of describing, obtaining and applying information to determine what things are necessary to achieve a purpose that can be justified and defended. Needs assessment has two functions: (i) identifying existing needs and how to fulfil those needs, and (ii) using those needs as criteria that determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the program in meeting the students' important needs. Needs assessment is of particular importance in designing ESP courses, because teaching ESP revolves around the goal for which the students study the English language.

To assess students' academic and professional needs, the following steps can be followed: Preparing a needs inventory (questionnaires, interviews and observations), including the questions; identifying the participants, procedures for collecting data and data analysis procedures; interpreting the results; identifying the students' needs; preparing the needs assessment report that will be sent to the concerned authorities; using and applying the needs data that have been identified in planning and designing the program (Stufflebeam, et al., 1985).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the importance of ESP courses, many studies in the literature have focused on the type of ESP course design model that meets students' need and goals, suit their proficiency level in English and type of English language that the students will be using while studying and after graduation. For example, Sifakis (2003) suggested an integrative model for ESP curriculum design. Kim (1998) suggested a functional-notional approach to ESP syllabus design, which is learner-centered, self-motivating, emphasizes the communicative purpose of the language, students' special needs, and identification of the functions.

Further studies described in detail how ESP courses in specific disciplines can be designed. For instance, Kim (1998) reported on need analysis and curriculum design for an ESP program for Food Service in Texas A & M University based on the functional-notional approach. Gray-Richards & Kirley (1983) assessed the need for studying English among students majoring in the health sciences who have to sit for a certification exam, in order to use those needs as a basis for increasing students' mastery of general and specialized English. Furthermore, Baumgardner, Chamberlain, Dharmapriya & Staley (1985) analyzed engineering students' needs at the diploma and bachelor's levels through questionnaires, interviews with professors and students, attending lectures, observed teaching methods and examining certification criteria set by the National Council. The diploma students' course focused on developing their

cognitive skills using a skill-integration approach, teamwork, and problem-solving situations that are graded in difficulty level.

Similarly, Sorensen (1985) analyzed agriculture students' need for studying English and used those needs as a basis for making the necessary adjustments in the English language curriculum used to prepare those students for work in the field of agriculture. The researcher conducted interviews with the professors, analyzed the students' written assignments in the various agricultural courses and collected the professors' notes on the students' research. Based on the data collected, the researcher identified the writing skills that students are expected to acquire and those that are difficult for them, then designed appropriate learning materials for developing students' problem-solving, discussion and persuasion skills.

In Germany, O'Flanagan (1982) designed a two-month program to train employees of the Siemens company to read specialized texts in English. The scientific material consisted of specialized dictionaries containing between 2900 & 4900 terms compiled from technical specifications and descriptions written in English. The program focused on teaching terminology intensively, reading specialized texts, and discussing the problems that the students faced while reading specialized texts.

In Chile, Huerta, Teresa and Others (1986), developed an ESP syllabus for students majoring in chemistry at the Catholic University in Santiago, after surveying faculty members' opinions on the teaching methods and instructional materials.

In Indonesia, Nababan (1993) the ESP materials design is closely related to the specific subject areas of language use and learner characteristics. The ESP program has 4 components: 4 levels of basic English, consisting of pre-reading information, reading passages, structure review, vocabulary, dialogue, and pronunciation review; 2 levels of an English correspondence component; 4 levels of oral English; and an advanced language level.

In Saudi Arabia, Al-Jarf (1994) designed an ESP course for graduate students at the Colleges of Liberal Arts, Administrative Sciences and Agriculture at King Saud University, based on their academic and occupational needs to learn English which were assessed by a questionnaire. In another study, Reynolds (1981) designed a program for developing the language skills of students at the College of Environmental Designs at King Abdulaziz University, to increase their technical vocabulary. The author used a theme-based and a task-based approach. The program focused on content related to the students' major and goals, and on learning by doing. In a third study, Bynum (1985) designed a course for Saudi students working in the field of petrochemical industries who are on scholarships to study English in the United States. The researcher used an integrative-skills approach, i.e., the course focused on reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammatical structures, technical terms, and general vocabulary, in addition to cultural activities and a program for qualifying students for the job upon return to the Kingdom.

Further studies have designed similar programs to teach ESP such as Benoussan & Golan (1981), Noss (1987), Wallace (1988), Goodfellow and Others (1984). Robinson (1985), Tomizawa (1991), Eggly & Schubiner (1991), Vivian (1984), Abo Mosallem (1984), Schleppegrell (1985), Land (1983), and others.

It is noteworthy to say that the literature review showed lack of studies that focused on designing English for Islamic Studies (EIS) courses for students at the undergraduate or

postgraduate levels, whether in Saudi Arabia or other countries. Therefore, the current study aims to examine and evaluate the EIS courses currently used at the Women's Colleges in Saudi Arabia, in general, and reading texts, in particular, to reveal their weaknesses. It also aims to propose a new model for designing EIS courses for undergraduate students at Women's Colleges in Saudi Arabia, show the course aims, skills and subskills that need to be emphasized.

III. CONTEXT

In Saudi Arabia, there are 104 women's colleges of Education, Arts, Science and Home Economics scattered all over the kingdom. Undergraduate students majoring in Islamic Studies at some of Women's Colleges are required to take an English for Islamic Studies (EIS) course each year of the B.A. program, i.e., a total of 4 EIS courses. The current EIS curriculum has been updated. The material for all four EIS courses was developed in-house by a group of instructors at the Women's Colleges. The author had the opportunity to evaluate those materials before assigning them to the students.

Each of the 4 proposed course consists of 5 units. Each unit consists of the following: (i) A reading component (text and comprehension questions); (ii) a vocabulary component (few words and their dictionary definition and a gap-filling vocabulary exercise); and (iii) a translation component (the same reading text is reprinted with blank lines for the students to write their own translation). An examination of the EIS course revealed the following weaknesses.

1) EIS Course Objectives

The course objectives are too general. The skills to be developed, the reading sub-skills, vocabulary, and translation skills to be developed are not specified. Grammar is not integrated in the textbook. A separate grammar book is used.

2) Amount of Course Material

The number of teaching hours allocated to the course per week or semester is not mentioned. The material in each unit can be covered in one class (50 minutes) and the whole reading material can be covered in 5 teaching hours, i.e., the material is insufficient for 14 teaching weeks.

3) Reading Texts and Exercises

Reading passages lack gradation in length and difficulty level within each college level and from one college level to the next. The reading texts lack variety in theme. Some of the themes covered are: *The pillars of Islam*, *hijab*, *Muslim women from the early Islamic period*, and *stories of women who embraced Islam*. The reading texts are vague and lack the necessary details that would enable the students to understand the content. Ideas are abstract. English passages are a literal translation of Arabic sentences. The reading passages consist of a series of sentences that lack cohesion and coherence. The texts have no organizational structure (enumeration, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, definition, classification ...etc.). Stories have no theme, no setting, and no sequence of events. The passages lack the stylistic features and register of English Islamic texts.

The reading comprehension questions focus on literal comprehension. The students can answer the comprehension questions by matching the words of the question with those of the text, without really understanding the text. The answer to some questions can be neither explicitly found in the text nor inferred.

4) Vocabulary Component

Fewer than 10 words are selected from the reading text in each unit. The definitions of the 10 words are given. The words and their definitions are listed in a table. Providing the definition is the only way used for teaching the meaning of new lexical items. Sometimes the definition is more difficult than the defined word. Many difficult words in the text were not explained and their meaning cannot be inferred from context. Sometimes the word list contains easy words or words that are transliterations of Arabic words such as “*God, Shahada, Hadith*”. Texts contain no context clues to develop the students’ ability to infer meaning of unknown words from context. Most vocabulary exercises are gap-filling. Vocabulary exercises either require the students to fill in the gaps with the words whose definitions were provided or by requiring the students to look up the meanings of words in a dictionary. Matching exercises simply use the words that were defined with their definitions. The students can match a word with its definition by looking at the vocabulary list.

5) Translation Component

The same reading text is re-printed and students are asked to translate it. Although the students are required to translate the same reading passages, translation skills and techniques are not mentioned at all.

IV. PROPOSED MODEL

The EIS courses at the Women’s Colleges need to be re-designed by a team of subject-matter, curriculum design and native English language experts. The register, discourse structure, stylistic features, and specific reading and vocabulary skills should be taken into consideration in the course design. The following guidelines should be taken into consideration when designing EIS courses.

4.1 Planning the Course

- Make a list of sub-skills, order them in term of difficulty & distribute them among the 4 years.
- Select the reading resources.
- The text difficulty level and length should increase from one year to the next.
- To brainstorm, advance organizers such as questions, pictures, a news story should be used before reading the text.
- Select the lexical items (500 words per year).
- Lexical items should cover Islamic terms and general English words.
- Make a list of grammatical structures that frequently occur in Islamic texts.

4.2 Assessing Students’ Needs

Before designing the course, a needs assessment questionnaire can be used to find out why undergraduate students majoring in Islamic studies need to learn English and what the students will be using English for while studying and after they graduate from college.

4.3 Defining the EIS Course Objective

On the basis of the students’ needs assessment surveys, the major skills that the students need to acquire must be defined (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and/or using technology etc.). Specific sub-skills should be identified. Islamic technical vocabulary and grammatical structures typical of Islamic texts should be integrated and learnt in context.

4.4 The ESP Course Components

The EIS course should have the following components:

4.4.1 Reading

The following *specific reading skills* should be practiced: (a) Identifying main ideas and supporting details. (b) Comprehending ideas that are explicitly and implicitly stated in the text. (c) Skimming and scanning for required information. (v) Distinguishing facts and opinions. (e) Identifying and understanding opposing points of view. (f) Finding reasons an author used to support his/her opinion. (g) Identifying bias. (h) Recognizing expressions of “all, each, every”. (i) Detecting propaganda devices. (j) Detecting inconsistencies in the presentation of information. (k) Recognizing statements that lack proof. (l) Following directions. (m) Understanding long, complex sentences and breaking them down into smaller units. (n) Identifying pronoun antecedents. (o) Identifying the organizational structure of a text. (p) Identifying transitional word and devices that signal comparison and contrast, classification, enumeration, sequences of events, cause-effect, illustrative examples ().

The *reading texts* should increase in length and difficulty within each college level and between levels. The texts can be selected from different resources such as books, magazines, newspapers, and Internet websites. Texts with different organizational structures must be used. Texts should contain concrete ideas and have sufficient details such as names of persons, places, dates, and examples. Expository texts should have a main idea and supporting details (compare-contrast, cause-effect relationships, classification, illustration, enumeration, definitions, sequencing). The texts should contain transitional words between sentences and paragraphs, and devices that signal the text structure should be used. Narrative texts should contain all story components: The protagonist’s name, setting (time and place), plot, climax, finale, moral, sequence of events.

The *reading themes* should cover *local themes* such as sample verses from the Holy Quran, Prophet’s Hadiths “sayings”, Islamic history, biographies, miraculous Quran, status of women in Islam, women’s rights, family in Islam, contributions of Muslim scientists and scholars to humanity, Hijab, working women. The texts should include *global themes* such as: current global issues and problems, women’s image in the media, comparison of world religions, relationship between Islamic and non-Islamic countries, world peace, effect of terrorism on societies, violence, conflict among religions, mixed marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims, Muslim minorities in Europe and America and others (Al-Jarf, 2002; Al-Jarf, 2003).

4.4.2 Vocabulary in Context

Islamic terms and new general lexical items should be taught in context. Semantic, syntactic, and morphological clues should be used to infer the meaning of new words from context. Students should be trained to derive meaning from the semantic context (through definitions, use of punctuation marks, synonyms and antonyms, examples). Students should be trained to derive meaning of unknown words from the syntactic context (Al-Jarf, 2005).

4.4.3 Grammar in Context

Grammatical structures such as the historical present, reported speech and modals should be taught in context (Al-Jarf, 2005).

4.4.4 Translation skills

Translation instruction should focus on rendering a translation of the overall meaning of a short text that was already read and discussed in class, rather than a full or literal translation of each sentence in the text. The students translate the overall meaning of a text from Arabic to English and from English to Arabic. Students should draw on their background knowledge in Islamic studies in Arabic in comprehension and translation. The instructor gives some translation tips such as: (i) Arabic sentences begin with the verb, (ii) imagining an audience for whom the student is translating, and (iii) pointing out differences between English and Arabic Islamic Studies discourse. Students' in-class translation practice should be monitored, and feedback provided. The instructor gives group feedback in case of common problems. The students can post their re-written translations on an online discussion forum, online course or blog.

4.4.5 Internet Searching Skills

Internet searching skills include signing up for and using an e-mail; identifying Internet Explorer's menus; defining search terms; using search engines Google, MSN, Yahoo; downloading files; bookmarking websites; searching for Islamic websites (Islam Online, Islam Web); finding articles about specific topics in Islamic websites; and finding, searching, and writing in online forums (Al-Jarf, 2003a; Al-Jarf, 2003b; Al-Jarf, 2003).

V. CONCLUSION

Effective EIS instruction depends on the instructor's competence. Therefore, EIS instructors should receive some orientation about EIS through training programs, as they might be specialized in teaching general English, but not EIS. They should be introduced to the different types of Islamic texts, Islamic studies terminology, reading, translation and electronic searching skills.

EIS instructors may assess students' proficiency level at the beginning of the semester, if students are poor, then the EIS instructor needs to use supplementary practice material that consists of short, easy texts and move on to longer and more difficult texts for a couple of weeks before starting the actual course material. The instructors should teach Islamic terminology and grammatical structures in context. Listening, speaking and writing activities can be based on the topic of the reading texts under study. Focus should be on understanding and translating the overall meaning of the text, not on the literal meaning of every single text especially when reading narrative texts.

The instructor should encourage the students to be active in class and the learning environment should be secure for making mistakes. Focus should be on communication and not on correcting every single error made by the students. Students should receive feedback on their performance and areas of improvement.

In assessing the course, focus should be on identifying which reading and vocabulary skills have been acquired by the students and which ones have not. Assessment should provide

feedback on the suitability of the reading material, activities, and assignments in terms of difficulty level and skills developed.

Finally, EIS should be student-centered, not teacher-centered. The students should have an active role in the classroom. They may identify the difficult words and structures, read, translate, speak, bring texts of interest to them from paper and online resource, and correct their own and each other's errors. An online course or an online discussion forum can be integrated in EIS instruction where texts and assignments can be posted, and discussions can be held. At the end of the course, students and instructors' feedback is significant for the continual improvement of the EIS courses.

References

- Abo Mosallem, E. (1984). English for police-officers in Egypt. *The ESP Journal*, 3, 171-181.
- Al-Jarf, R. (1994). An ESP program model for graduate students at King Saud University based on academic and occupational needs. *Journal of Education and Islamic Sciences, King Saud University*, 6(1), 67-95.
- Al-Jarf, R. (2002). *Training ESP college students in electronic searching*. KAMALL International Conference entitled "A New Paradigm for Innovative Multimedia Language Education in the 21 Century". *Korea Association of Multimedia-Assisted Language Learning*, pp. 271-279.
- Al-Jarf, R. (2003). *Global themes in Saudi history textbooks for grades 4-12*. Conference on Curriculum Development: Principles and Starting Points. College of Education, King Saud University.
- Al-Jarf, R. (2003). *Global themes in Singaporean secondary social studies textbooks*. Conference on Curriculum Development: Principles and Starting Points. College of Education, King Saud University.
- Al-Jarf, R. (2003). Training ESP College Students in Electronic Searching. *Multimedia Assisted Language Learning*. 6, 1, 9-17. ERIC Number: ED613067
- Al-Jarf, R. (2005). English and Arabic word formation processes for translation students. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Reima-Al-Jarf/publication/281003183>
- Al-Jarf, R. (2005). The effects of online grammar instruction on low proficiency EFL college students' achievement. *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(4), 166-190.
- Al-Jarf, R. (2005). *Using a small network to teach internet searching skills to ESP graduate students*. In Santiago Posteguillo, Maria Jose Exteve, M. Lluisa Gea Valor, Salvador-Damia Insa & Maria Luisa Renau Renau (Eds). *Language @ work Language learning, discourse and Translation studies in internet*. Universitat Jaume I, Castellon, Spain. 71-82.

- Al-Jarf, R. (2004). Using online instruction in English for art education. In Ambigapathy Pandian, Gitu Chakravarthy, Sarjit Kaur, Shameem Rafik-Galea, Salasiah Che Lah and Chong Larry D. (Eds). *Perspectives on Computers in Language Learning*. Universiti Sains Malaysia: Penang, Malaysia.
- Al-Jurf, R. (2003). Training ESP college students in electronic searching. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Reima-Al-Jarf/publication/237702329>
- Baumgardner, R., Chamberlain, D., Dharmapriya, A. & Staley, B. (1985). *ESP for engineers: Two approaches*. ERIC ED267612.
- Benoussan, M. & Golan, J. (1981). *English for students of mathematics*. ERIC ED257314.
- Bynum, H. S. (1985). *English for petrochemical plant operators*. ERIC ED271997.
- Edelfelt, R. (1980). *Teacher centers and needs assessment*. Washington, D.C.: National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, Teacher Center Project.
- Eggly, S. & Schubiner, H. (1991). *Course in speaking fluency for foreign medical residents in the United States*. ERIC ED344485.
- Goodfellow, P. and Others (1984). *EST: Designing a mini course for non-native speakers of English in a chemistry lab course*. ERIC ED274183.
- Gray-Richards, M. & Kirley, E. (1983). *English for the health sciences: Special projects report*. ERIC ED238246.
- Kim, Y. M. (1998). *A Functional-notional approach for English for specific purposes (ESP) programs*. ERIC ED343435.
- Huerta, T. & thers (1986). Balancing institutional and motivational factors in ESP syllabus design. *English for Specific Purposes*, 5(2), 189-95.
- Land, G. (1983). A made-to-measure ESP course for banking staff. *The ESP Journal*, 2, 161-171,
- Mackay, R. (1978). *Identifying the nature of the learner's needs*. In R. Mackay & A. Mountford (Eds.), *English for specific purposes*. London: Longman
- Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative syllabus design*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nababan, P. (1993). *E.S.P. Materials Preparation in a Foreign Language Situation*. ERIC ED366223.
- Noss, R. (1987). *English for diplomats*. ERIC ED293331.
- O'Flanagan, N. (1982). A program for teaching and learning to read professional texts in a second/foreign language at Siemens AG. ERIC ED224329.

- Reynolds, M. (1981). *Communicative syllabus design-- The topic and task approach*. ERIC ED215559.
- Richterich, R. & Chancerel J. (1980). *identifying the needs of adults learning a foreign language*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Robinson, B. (1985). *language for communication engineers-- a case study in two-way curriculum development*. ERIC ED262625.
- Robinson, P. (1980). *English for specific purposes*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Schleppegrell, M. & Bowman, B. (1986). *ESP: teaching English for specific purposes*. ERIC ED274218.
- Schleppegrell, M. (1985). Economic input: An ESP program. *The ESP journal*, 4, 111-119.
- Schmidt, M. F. (1981). *Needs assessment in English for specific purposes: the case study*. In L. Selinker, E. Tarone & V Hanzeli (Eds.), *English for academic and technical purposes: Studies in honor of Louis Trimble*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Sifakis, N. C. (2003). Applying the adult Education Framework to ESP Curriculum Development: An Integrative Model. *English for Specific Purposes*, 22(2), 195-211.
- Sorensen, K. (1985). *Modifying an ESP course syllabus and materials through a teacher-planned needs assessment*. ERIC ED275196.
- Stevens, P. (1977). *New orientations in the teaching of English*. Oxford University Press.
- Stufflebeam, D., McCormick, C., Brinkerhoff, R., & Cheryl. O. (1985). *Conducting educational needs assessment*. Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing.
- Tomizawa, S. (1991). *Designing an intensive English program for business people: Curriculum and courses*. ERIC ED344485.
- Vivian, S. (1984). ESP nursing assistants and home health workers. *The ESP Journal*, 3, 165-170.
- Wallace, R. (1988). *Teaching English for the professionals: English for specific purposes in ESL undergraduate composition courses*. ERIC ED304904.